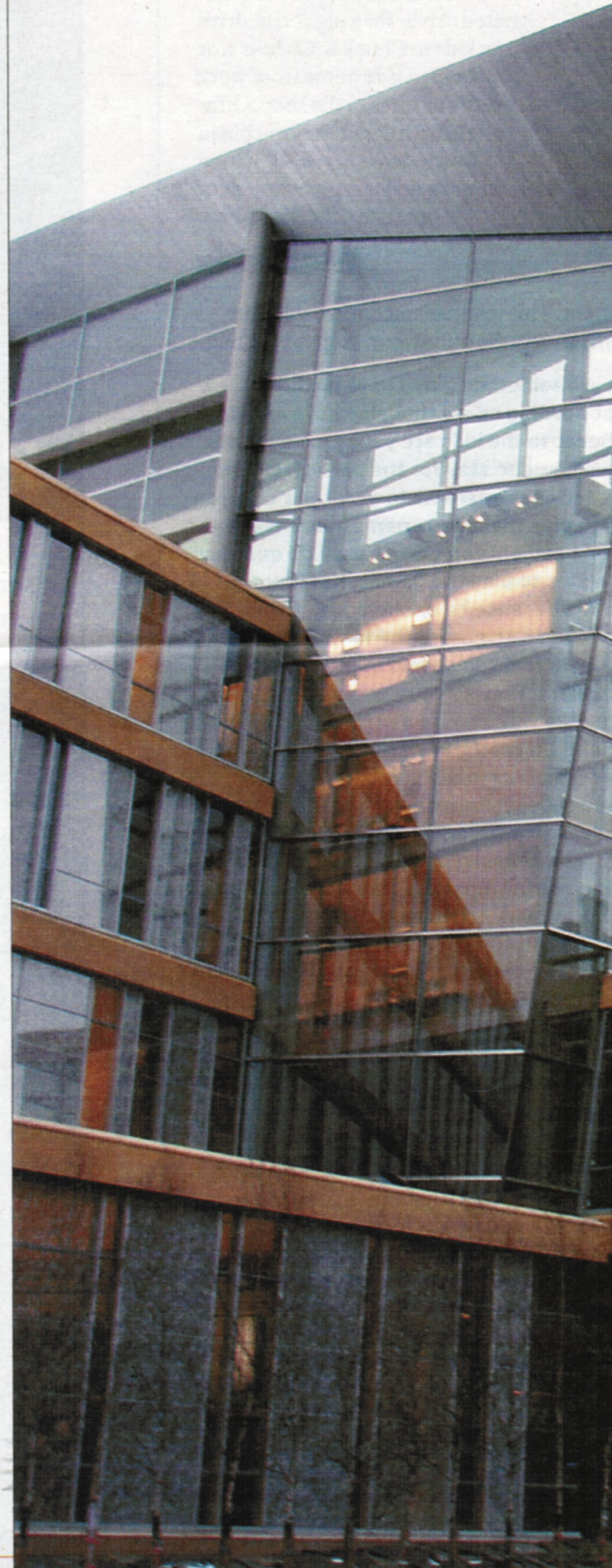


Great Vacations Where Your Dollar Goes Far

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You can travel to exotic locales or indulge in choice hotels and meals – and still not break the bank. Our complete guide shows you how.

BY JUDITH FEIN, MARTHA HUME, STEPHEN JERMANOK,
ERIN O'DONNELL, AND JANICE O'LEARY



Getaway for Architecture Buffs

WHY IT'S A DEAL Minneapolis offers cosmopolitan allure at reasonable prices and is ideal for a weekend vacation. More than \$300 million in new buildings designed by A-list "starchitects" opened this summer, a bonanza that has the cognoscenti buzzing. Yet, in this Midwestern city, the hip and homey coexist comfortably – you'll never meet friendlier waitresses or garage attendants – and with a little care, you can stay on budget.

HOW TO GET THERE Several airlines offer flights from Logan to the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport for about \$250 round trip, though the price can drop below \$200. From the airport, take the light-rail line into downtown Minneapolis; the 25-minute ride is \$2 at rush hour and \$1.50 at other times. Once you're downtown, taxi rides are generally short and sweet, but you'll need a phone to summon a cab. If you rent a car, parking meters are plentiful and garage prices are generally reasonable. The gridded streets are easier to navigate than Boston's jumbled byways, but a word to the directionally challenged: Don't confuse the numbered streets and avenues. Downtown Minneapolis is also surprisingly walkable, even in frigid months, thanks to the skyway. This system of elevated, climate-controlled walkways connects buildings across roughly 80 city blocks.

WHERE TO STAY Hotel rates in Minneapolis dip on weekends when business travelers leave town. So double rooms at the Best Western Normandy Inn (612-370-1400, www.bestwestern.com) can be in the \$100 range per night on weekends. Want to splurge? Consider the Graves 601 Hotel (866-523-1100, graves601hotel.com), with its modern decor, luxury beds, and plasma-screen televisions in every room. Normally \$259 or more on weeknights, a king (double) room is \$199 on weekends.

WHAT TO DO Take a tour of the city's newly unveiled architectural masterpieces. Most, like the Guthrie Theater, can be visited for free. Minneapolis is justifiably proud of the Guthrie (612-377-2224, guthrietheater.org), a stunner on the banks of the Mississippi River. Designed by

French architect Jean Nouvel, it features a shimmering indigo-blue exterior and boxy shapes that mimic the nearby flour mills. Don't miss the "Endless Bridge," a cantilevered walkway that extends 178 feet, offering dramatic views of the Mississippi's St. Anthony Falls.

The Minneapolis Central Library (612-630-6000, mpls.lib.mn.us/central.asp), designed by architect Cesar Pelli, tops honey-colored limestone and a soaring five-story atrium with angular steel that resembles a massive airplane wing or an open book. Windows on the upper floors offer peeks at the library's "green" roof, 18,560 square feet of hardy plants cultivated to prevent storm-water runoff and conserve energy. And even if your teenage years are a distant memory, stop by "Teen Central" to admire the curvy red bookcases made of Japanese ash.

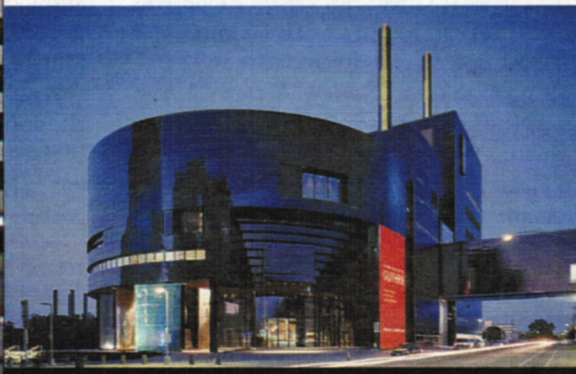
Other Minneapolis highlights include the giant metal cube added to the Walker Art Center (612-375-7600, walkerart.org) by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, masterminds behind the Tate Modern in London, and the new wing of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (888-642-2787, artsmia.org) created by Michael Graves, a favorite designer of the hometown Target Corp.

Take a break with affordable pampering at the Aveda Institute (612-331-1400, aveda.com), located near the University of Minnesota. The Minneapolis-based company trains student aestheticians here, giving you the chance to sample stress-busting treatments at reduced prices. Get an Elemental Nature facial for \$40 or a 60-minute foot reflexology treatment for \$44. Call to schedule appointments a few weeks before you leave home; they're snatched up quickly.

WHERE TO EAT The Minneapolis combination of hip and homey is particularly evident at Bryant-Lake Bowl (612-825-3737, bryantlakebowl.com), located in the popular Uptown neighborhood. Hit the lanes at this retro bowling alley, then dine on well-priced dishes that will warm a foodie's heart. Offerings include an artisanal cheese plate with bounty from nearby Wisconsin, a seared sesame-crusted ahi tuna and seaweed salad, an organic bison salad, and an impressive wine and beer list. The Bryant-Lake Bowl's Cheap Date Night on Mondays is a neighborhood highlight: Get two entrees, a bottle of wine, and two rounds of bowling for \$28.

For inexpensive ethnic fare, try Nicollet Avenue just south of Grant Street, an area known as "Eat Street." These blocks are crammed with restaurants offering Indian, Vietnamese, Greek, Mexican, and East African cuisine. —E.O.

BUILDING BOOM Noted architects have lent their star power to Minneapolis. There's Cesar Pelli's Central Library (shown here) and Jean Nouvel's Guthrie Theater (below right).



Last-Minute Getaways

Not every vacation has to be planned months in advance. Winging it will help you stretch your dollar.

Part of the fun of a vacation is the planning: reading up on your destination, shopping for the journey, and simply anticipating the trip. But if you're willing to forgo all that, you can score great deals by waiting until the last minute to book your travel. Planning a vacation in two weeks or less can save you 25 percent to 50 percent, and sometimes even 75 percent, on getaways like cruises. Last-minute vacationers aren't just retirees, says David Crooks, a vice president for National Leisure Group, the Woburn-based parent company of Vacation Outlet. They can be anyone with a free weekend, a desire to escape bad weather, or the willingness to be spontaneous.

"The idea is to be flexible and not have your heart set on a specific place," says Tim Leffel, the Nashville-based author of *Make Your Travel Dollars Worth a Fortune*. Booking a week on the beach? You probably won't land at your first-choice resort. "But does it really matter if you go to the Dominican Republic or Jamaica or Mexico, if you're going to sit on the beach and drink cocktails?" he asks.

Watch websites that specialize in last-minute travel. For example, site59.com offers weekend deals to US cities, including spots not usually considered tourist destinations. "These days," Leffel says, "almost any city has attractions worth seeing, especially if you're just going for a weekend."

Cruises are ideal because many depart from Boston or New York, so they don't need to involve airfare. Last-minute passengers often can't choose the location of their cabin, Crooks says, but they'll otherwise get the same experience as full-price customers.

Final advice from the experts: Don't expect to find great deals during peak travel periods, such as New Year's or school vacations. And make sure your passport is current, as applying for a new one can take six weeks. A new law effective January 8 requires that you carry passports for air and sea travel to destinations like Canada, the Caribbean, and Mexico. — E.O.



stay at their place, instead of giving them flowers as

Extreme Bargains

If you've got an adventurous streak, these options are for you.

HOUSE SITTING → You score free lodging in homes around the world in exchange for caring for the house, garden, and pets while owners are away. To connect with homeowners, visit housecarers.com, an Australian site founded in 2000 where you can list your contact information for \$35 a year. You'll find positions in more than 11 countries, ranging in length from two days to two years. Founder Ian White says house-sitters generally pay for utilities during longer stays, and some homeowners require a refundable security deposit. He advises homeowner and sitter to sign an agreement that spells out expectations. (See the sample form on his site.)

COUCH SURFING → Stay in the homes (or camp in the backyards) of people who agree to host you - for free. But couch surfing has loftier goals than just cheap travel. It's designed to foster cross-cultural understanding, so hosts and travelers share meals and socialize. Some groups don't charge for access to their host lists, but Servas International (servas.org), founded in 1948 to promote peace, requires travelers to pay \$85 a year and be interviewed. Members carry an official letter of introduction, which they present at each home they visit. Kate Soukonnikov of Newton has played host and traveler though Servas since 1989 and says the system works. "I've never felt unsafe," the 53-year-old says, "even when I was single." Servas counts 15,000 hosts worldwide. Home stays last no more than two nights, unless you're invited to stay longer.

HOUSE SWAPPING → You and another person agree to trade homes (and often cars) for a set period of time, ranging from a long weekend to a month or more. No money changes hands (other than cash to cover land-line long-distance calls), says Karl Costabel, US representative for HomeLink International (homelink.org), founded in 1953 to connect potential home-exchangers. A one-year membership, which gives you a listing in HomeLink's online and paper directories, costs \$80 and puts you in touch with the owners of 14,000 homes in about 65 countries. Renters can list their digs, too, but get the landlord's OK first.

LABOR-FOR-LODGING → In exchange for free or low-cost food and shelter, you provide sweat and elbow grease. Consider the volunteer trail vacations offered by the Appalachian Mountain Club (outdoors.org). Volunteer crews help AMC maintain hiking trails by clearing brush and building bridges, says Heather Clish, director of trails stewardship. Participants should be fit, but "you don't need to be an athletic superstar to join us," Clish says. You'll sleep in basic bunkhouses or camp outdoors, and a few trips require you to bring food, but you pay as little as \$6 for some weekends and up to \$150 for weeklong trips. This fall, AMC has a few remaining weekend programs - which are family friendly - in spots like New Hampshire's Cardigan Lodge. Weeklong trips resume in June. - E.O.



TRAVEL TIP Before you leave home, check if your mem